

# Monticello's preservation forever linked to Jewish family

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*A Jewish family owned Thomas Jefferson's estate for 89 years, restoring and preserving it.*

I've never met an American who didn't have a soft spot in his heart for Thomas Jefferson and Monticello, his home and plantation in Charlottesville.

After his term as president expired in 1809, Jefferson lived full time at Monticello. The house, which Jefferson called "his essay in architecture," is a testament to his genius. The 11,000-square-foot neoclassical mansion has 21 rooms, and from the moment you set foot in the reception and waiting room, with its grass-green floor and museum-like exhibits of natural history specimens, Native American and African artifacts, you know are in the domain of a man of taste, knowledge and broad interests.



During his lifetime, Jefferson spent freely and entertained lavishly, often hosting dozens of guests for weeks at a time. When he died in 1826, he was about \$100,000 in debt (about \$2 million in today's dollars). Jefferson's heirs could not afford to keep Monticello and, to the shock and sadness of everyone who admired his book room (which once held more than 6,000 volumes), bedroom (where the latest gadgets and technological inventions surround his bed), dining room (with its dumbwaiters, hidden in the fireplace, that brought wine up from the cellar), guestrooms, art collection and dome room, the plantation had to be sold.

Historical treasure or not, no one wanted Monticello. In 1827, Jefferson's daughter and grandson auctioned off the slaves, possessions and even the stored grain and farm equipment. The empty house decayed from lack of upkeep. Finally, the estate was purchased by James Turner Barclay for \$7,000, but he held on to it for only three years before selling it in 1834.

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## **THE BEST WAY TO CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA.**

**From LAX**, connecting service (change of plane) to Charlottesville is offered on United, US Airways and Delta. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$348.

**Monticello**, 931 Thomas Jefferson Parkway, Charlottesville, Va., (434) 984-9822, <http://www.monticello.org>, is open daily, except Christmas. House tour and tickets: adults, \$22 (March-October) and \$17 (November-February); children 6 to 11, \$8. "Saving Monticello: The Levy Family's Epic Quest to Rescue the House That Jefferson Built" by Marc Leepson is for sale in the gift shop. It's a fast-paced but detailed read.

## **TO LEARN MORE**

**Charlottesville and Albemarle County:** <http://www.visitcharlottesville.org>

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On Mulberry Row at Monticello, a nondescript tomb is the final resting place of Rachel Levy, mother of Monticello's third owner, Uriah P. Levy. The plantation remained in the Levy (pronounced "levee") family for 89 years. In fact, some believe that Uriah Levy was a founder of America's historic preservation movement because, at that time and well into the 20th century, there was no great interest in maintaining historical homes and sites.

Uriah Levy was a colorful and controversial character. He was an ardent Jefferson admirer and the first Jewish American to have a career as a U.S. naval officer. Larger than life, he was a hero in the War of 1812, defended Jewish rights, campaigned against flogging in the Navy, killed a man in a duel, was court-martialed six times and, at age 61, took a teenage wife who proudly nailed a mezuzah on the doorpost of his captain's quarters.

Today, in the waiting room at Monticello, which once held 28 chairs to accommodate the president's visitors, tour guides point out the ingenious seven-day clock, which Jefferson designed. It still functions, driven by two large, cannon ball-like weights that hang on both sides of the front door. The clock governed the time schedule in the house and plantation; it was attached to a Chinese gong that could be heard by slaves more than three miles away. Thanks to Levy, who spent a huge amount of money on the restoration and upkeep of Monticello, Jefferson's clock and other inventions and possessions are available today to tourists.

Levy's relationship with the plantation was not without its difficulties. According to "Saving Monticello" by Marc Leepson, it took years of wrangling to finalize the terms of ownership. After Levy took possession, the house and grounds were beset by hordes of visitors who trampled the gardens and even chipped off pieces of Jefferson's burial monument. Anti-Semitism also entered the fray when Levy was accused of buying the

presidential home for personal gain and was derided as an alien — an outsider in America.

After he died in 1862, childless, his will was contested by his family heirs for 17 years as the house decayed. Finally, in 1879, his nephew, Jefferson Monroe Levy (the name certainly suggests family patriotism), gained title. He was a wealthy New York lawyer, real estate mogul, stock speculator and three-term U.S. congressman. He never married and indicated on several occasions that he dedicated his life and fortune to the upkeep, restoration and refurbishment (in true Jeffersonian style) of Monticello.

J.M. Levy opened Monticello to vast numbers of tourists, claimed to live by Jeffersonian principles and lavishly entertained Theodore Roosevelt and other luminaries, yet was called a latter-day Shylock and accused of exploiting Jefferson's memory. A movement attempted to wrest Monticello from him and hand it to the government. Levy defended his right to the estate and insisted that he would never turn it over to anyone, including the government.

By 1911, the opposition to Levy's ownership was at a fevered pitch, Leepson writes. Maud Littleton, a New York socialite, was Levy's main opponent, and her anti-Semitic attacks on him were relentless. Even though the Levy family had been in America for five generations, they were still considered outsiders and not American enough to own the house that President Jefferson built.

Beset by financial difficulties, Levy held out as long as he could before agreeing to sell Monticello to the government for \$500,000. Although many considered the asking price to be exorbitant, Levy insisted it was half of what he had spent on the estate. For years, the proposal for the government to purchase Monticello was passed from committee to committee. Finally, the asking price was met by a private group, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation. Levy is said to have burst out crying when he signed over the deed to his beloved estate. He died insolvent before his 72nd birthday.

Today, tour guides at Monticello mention the Levy family only briefly. When you visit, pause for a moment at Rachel Levy's tomb. If you have the inclination, thank Uriah and Jefferson Levy for preserving what is now one of the most beloved tourist destinations in America.